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The Egyptian Background of Gnostic Mythology

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Abstract

The mythologies recorded by Irenaeus that he ascribes to the Gnostics contain many features that are difficult to explain by reference solely to Jewish sources, whether orthodox or heterodox. Previously, Douglas Parrott proposed an Egyptian background for the pattern of divinities found in the Gnostic text *Eugnostos*. In this article, it is argued that the so-called Ophite mythology recorded by Irenaeus is earlier than *Eugnostos* and has more compelling parallels with Egyptian theogony. An Egyptian background for the Barbeloite mythology is also speculated. These parallels demonstrate that there is scope for further research into the Egyptian origins of Gnosticism.

Keywords

Egyptian religion – Gnosticism – ennead of Heliopolis – Khonsu cosmology – Barbelo myth – Ophite myth

In 1987, Douglas Parrott wrote an article urging a reconsideration of the connection between ancient Egyptian religion and Gnosticism (Parrott 1987). We know that some Gnostics came from Egypt (Parrott 1987: 76–77). The Nag Hammadi texts were written in Coptic and found in Egypt, *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* was later given the title *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, and of Christian heretics influenced by Gnosticism, both Basilides and Valentinus are

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reported to have come from Alexandria (Irenaeus *Against Heresies* [AH] 1.24; Epiphanius *Medicine Chest* II.31.2.1). However, since the publication of Parrott's article, there does not appear to have been significant interest in the question of the Egyptian background of Gnosticism. Brian Glazer drew attention to the motif of "fiery breath" in *On the Origin of the World* and *Hypostasis of the Archons*, which seems to find some parallel in Egyptian coffin texts (1991). The presence of Isiac motifs in Gnostic literature is postulated by Jan Helderman (1981) and Bentley Layton (1986). Joachim Quack identified an Egyptian background for the list of demons found in the *Apocryphon of John* (1995). Prior to Parrott's article, Howard Jackson had looked for precedent of the lion-headed Ialdabaoth in the Egyptian god Mios (1983). However, the more recent emphasis on the Jewish background of Gnosticism has distracted scholars from pursuing the Egyptian parallels.

A perennial problem that besets the study of Gnosticism is defining it as a category (Williams 1996; King 2005). The term "Gnosticism" is associated with those whom both Christians, like Irenaeus and Hippolytus, and Platonists, like Plotinus and Porphyry, engaged with and sought to refute. It is also associated with a number of texts, including those found at Nag Hammadi. But what is it that connects them? One approach has been to try to identify a specific community. For example, many scholars follow Hans-Martin Schenke in identifying a specific movement called "Sethian Gnosticism," defined according to a set of criteria (such as positing an evil demiurge) (Schenke 1981). An alternative approach, as advocated by Frederik Wisse, has been to view Gnostics as loosely connected individuals who shared "free-floating theologumena and mythologumena" (Wisse 1981: 575; cf. Williams 1996: 12). A third option might be to abandon the term Gnosticism and work only with individual texts and testimonies. Following Alastair Logan, I think it is possible to identify a specific cult that called themselves *gnōstikoi*, and were called so by others (including Celsus, Porphyry, and Irenaeus). Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I will be working with the proposal by Logan, who views the mythologies described by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 1.1.29–30 as the core mythology of the Gnostics (Logan 1996, 2006; cf. Layton 1987; Brakke 2012). I have deviated from Logan in one respect by distinguishing two separate mythologies, which I term "Barbeloite" (AH 1.29) and "Ophite" mythology (AH 1.30) (Rasimus 2009).

Logan argues that Gnosticism originated from within Christianity and innovated from that religious background to form a new cult. Of those scholars who consider Gnosticism to be an identifiable community, perhaps the greater number consider Sethian Gnosticism to have its origins in Judaism. This scholarly focus on the Jewish background of Gnosticism is due to its explanatory power. In particular, the wisdom literature almost certainly provides the

background for the figure of Sophia in these mythologies, though inverted from being God's agent in creation to a fallen spirit-being who creates impetuously (AH 1.29.4) or unintentionally (AH 1.30.3) (MacRae 1970).[1] The works of Philo, with his personification of aspects of God's activity, also provide rich ground for further study. Logan argues that a purely Jewish background for Gnosticism lacks "any coherent rationale for the revolutionary position adopted by these Gnostics" (Logan 1996: xviii). Yet whether mediated through Christianity, or sourced directly from Judaism, much of the mythologumena of the Gnostic mythologies seems appropriated from Jewish texts and ideas.

There are some elements of the Gnostic mythologies that do not find obvious antecedents in Judaism. In particular, the aeons within the Pleroma, and their specific relationships, are difficult to account for. It is not that the general argument of Gnostic mythology is unclear. The intention is to put space between God and the creation of the world. In this sense, the multiplication of aeons forms a mythological theodicy. What needs to be explained are the configuration of aeons and the specific interrelations between the aeons. The early parts of both mythologies read for all the world like a pagan theogony; it is my contention that this is because part of the background of these mythologies are ancient Egyptian theogonies.

Methodology

In this article I will be exploring possible Egyptian precedents for apparently theogonic elements in the mythologies summarized by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 1.29–30. I have selected these mythologies primarily following Logan, for whom these mythologies form part of the criteria for identifying Gnosticism. In addition, Irenaeus is arguably the earliest witness to these mythologies. The *Apocryphon of John* has many similarities with Barbeloite mythology as summarized by Irenaeus (AH 1.29), but it is extant in manuscripts dating from the fourth century. Although its original composition, in either the shorter or longer known recessions, almost certainly predates the fourth century, it is not possible to fix the date of composition with any degree of certainty. Some details peculiar to Irenaeus' summary of the Barbeloite mythology indicate that he is working from a different composition from, or an earlier edition of, the *Apocryphon of John* (Layton 1987: 163). Further, Irenaeus is the only known witness to this form of the Ophite mythology, except perhaps the descriptions

1 In other Gnostic texts, Sophia is portrayed as innocent or is given no role in creation (Brakke 2012: 58–59).

of the Ophite diagram by Celsus and Origen (*Contra Celsum* 6.24). Tuomas Rasimus identifies Ophite elements in four of the Nag Hammadi texts — namely, *Eugnostos*, *On the Origin of the World*, *Hypostasis of Archons*, and the *Apocryphon of John* — but in each case these texts seem to have incorporated Barbeloite elements and probably date later than Irenaeus' testimony.

Working with Irenaeus as a witness to Gnosticism presents some methodological problems. First, Irenaeus is not a primary source. Secondly, Irenaeus is writing a polemic against Valentinianism, Gnosticism, and other "heresies," so his account is not objective and may be colored by his antagonism. For my purposes neither of these methodological problems is fatal because I am not proposing a linguistic analysis comparing Egyptian inscriptions and Gnostic texts, for which Irenaeus would be an unsuitable source. My analysis is primarily a narrative comparison, attempting to coordinate characters and their relationships between Egyptian and Gnostic mythologies. Appeals to similar descriptors and phraseology are secondary and corroborative of the primary narrative comparison. Irenaeus' antagonism does not seem to have been substantially altered from the narrative he is reporting, though it is, no doubt, abbreviated. Some of his more peculiar phraseology throughout these passages seem best explained by the proposition that he is summarizing texts with which he is acquainted (Rasimus 2009: 10; Layton 1987: 163). The close correspondence between the Barbeloite mythology summarized by Irenaeus (AH 1.29) and some of the Nag Hammadi texts, especially the *Apocryphon of John*, indicates Irenaeus is reliably reporting the text.

There are known methodological problems with using the comparative method, and especially with attempting to draw evolutionary links between the two phenomena being compared (Smith 1982). Comparisons can often be vague and tendentious without giving appropriate emphasis on the differences between the two phenomena being compared. Further, to posit an evolution between the two phenomena requires demonstrating that the one predates the other and is in physical proximity to the other. To address these methodological concerns, it is necessary to provide some basis upon which the similarities may be considered significant and to give an account, if only speculative, of the proximal links between Egyptian religion and Gnostic mythology.

First, it is worth noting that I am comparing mythologies in two different languages, from two different cultures, with two different worldviews. The Egyptian mythologies I will consider were inscribed in hieroglyphs, and were composed in a polytheistic culture that did not have a strong anti-cosmic

sentiment. In contrast, the Gnostic mythologies, summarized by Irenaeus, were probably originally composed in Greek, were written within a monist (if not strictly monotheistic) worldview, and are predicated on a strong anti-cosmic sentiment. These diverse backgrounds lead us to expect substantial differences when the mythologies are compared. What will be considered significant is when coordinate characters and relationships can be demonstrated despite these differing contexts.

Secondly, while my analysis is based upon Egyptian cosmogonies as recorded in inscriptions because here the parallels are most apparent, I am not proposing that the Ophites or the Barbeloites frequented Egyptian temples or pyramids, analyzing inscriptions for use in their own mythologies. Intermediary stages are assumed — in the latter part of this article, I will give an account of how Egyptian cosmogonies may have influenced the Gnostics.

Parrott on *Eugnostos*

In his article, Parrott proposes that the configuration of immortals found in *Eugnostos* has a precedent in Egyptian religion. *Eugnostos* describes a divine hierarchy of Unbegotten Father, who brings into existence the Self-Father, who brings into existence the androgynous Immortal Man and so on. In total, there are three androgynous beings (Immortal Man, Son of Man, and Savior) that are also conceived as consort pairs, each with a female Sophia-aspect (see Table 1). Parrott contrasts this hierarchy of five immortals with the list of six "spiritual beings" mentioned later in the text and correctly diagnoses that one immortal is omitted (coordinate with Arch-begetter) (Parrott 1987: 83). This sixth immortal was probably the demiurge and was omitted because the creation of the world is not mentioned in *Eugnostos*; an immortal named Arch-Begetter is mentioned in *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (a redaction of *Eugnostos*) and is identified as Yaldabaoth (*Berolinensis Gnosticus* [BG] 119.14–16) (Painchaud 1995: 86). The resulting pattern is two consortless immortals above four consort-pairs (i.e., a two-over-eight pattern). Parrott parallels this pattern with the *Urzeit* pattern of two consortless gods above an ogdoad of four consort-pairs as found in the Hermopolitan cosmogony (see Table 3a). He writes, "this *Urzeit* pattern is not found anywhere outside Egyptian religion during the period of the rise and development of Gnosticism" (Parrott 1987: 83). This pattern, though suggestive, is not as conclusive as Parrott supposes.

TABLE 1 *The immortals of* Eugnostos.

1. Unbegotten Father	
2. Self-Father	
3. Immortal Man	
Begotten Perfect Mind	All-Wise Begettress Sophia
4. Son of Man (= First Begetter Father)	
First-Begotten Son of God	First-Begotten Sophia
5. Savior (= Son of Son of Man)	
Savior, Begetter of All Things	Sophia, All Begettress (= Pistis)
6. Arch-Begetter (= Yaldabaoth)	Sophia

First, Parrott focused his article on *Eugnostos*, not unreasonably as many scholars have proposed that this may be one of the earliest extant Gnostic texts.[2] The difficulty with this proposal is that such a dating has no external support and rests entirely on interpretative issues. If Louis Painchaud is correct and *Eugnostos* is the sister text of *On the Origin of the World* (Painchaud 1995), which seems likely, then *Eugnostos*, like *Origin*, should be dated to the early fourth century.

Second, the parallels between *Eugnostos* and Egyptian cosmogonies are not strong. While it is true that in some early versions of the Hermopolitan cosmogony the chief deity is consortless and self-created, in later versions this deity or his "son" has a consort (see Table 4). Also, there is little similarity between the four androgynous immortals of *Eugnostos* and the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, apart from their number and gender. In *Eugnostos*, the immortals are understood as a hierarchy, each one emanating from the former; the Hermopolitan Ogdoad comes into being at the same time to move the primeval waters.

So while Parrott's conclusions are suggestive, they are ultimately flawed. However, Parrott does draw attention to the Ophite mythology recorded by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 1.30 (Parrott 1987: 92), which mentions four primeval elements. He incorrectly supposes that *Eugnostos* influenced the Ophites and so explains the appearance of this Egyptian motif in Irenaeus' account. In fact, it is probable that the Ophite mythology is earlier than *Eugnostos* and, as we shall see, the parallels with Egyptian cosmogony are much more clearly defined.

2 In the article under consideration, Parrott dates *Eugnostos* to the first century CE (78–79). In a later work, he dated the composition to the first century BCE (Parrott 1990: 221).

TABLE 2 *The "ecclesia" of the Ophite Myth* (*plus Ialdabaoth*).

First Man (father)	First Woman (mother)
Second Man (son)	Sophia
Third Man (savior)	Ialdabaoth (creator)

The (so-called) Ophite Mythology (AH 1.30)

Though we do not have the original of the Ophite mythology, Irenaeus' account seems to be a summary of a text. The first principle of this mythology is the Father, the First Man, existing in the deep (*bythus*). From him emanated his thought (*ennoia*), identified as the Second Man. These two "shed light" upon a lower spirit, the First Woman, and thus produced the Third Man, identified as Christ (1.30.1). The First Man and the Second Man both have intercourse with the First Woman. The resulting "excess of lights" overflow to the left and become Sophia (1.30.2–3). It is Sophia who is mother of Ialdabaoth, the malignant creator, who in turn brings forth offspring until there are a total of seven rulers (1.30.4–5).

The basic structure of this mythology centers around a male triad standing in relation to two female characters. It seems almost a trivial detail that Irenaeus includes four distinct primeval elements below the First Woman: water, darkness, abyss, and chaos (1.30.1). Yet, these four elements correspond precisely to four consort-pairs of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, being deifications of the qualities of primeval matter.[3] Parrott noted this correspondence but used an earlier version of the Hermopolitan cosmogony, and so was forced to correspond "abyss" with Tenemu and Tenemuet, the deifications of disappearance (see Table 3a) (Parrott 1987: 92). The correspondence is stronger if one equates "abyss" with Na'u and Na'uet, who are the fourth pair of the ogdoad as featured in the Khonsu Cosmogony (see Table 3b).

3 There is a parallelism between the primeval elements in the Ophite mythology and Genesis 1.2 ("and darkness was on the face of the deep"). However, the parallelism seems stronger with the Hermopolitian cosmogony, where there is a one-to-one correspondence with the four elements.

TABLE 3A *The Hermopolitan Ogdoad.*

Nun	Naunet	*watery vastness*
Heh	Hehet	*spacious endlessness*
Kek	Keket	*darkness and obscurity*
Tenemu	Tenemuet	*disappearance*

TABLE 3B *The Ogdoad of the Khonsu Cosmogony.*

Nun	Naunet	*watery vastness*
Heh	Hehet	*spacious endlessness*
Kek	Keket	*darkness and obscurity*
Na'u	Na'uet	*abyss*

The Khonsu Cosmogony

In early versions of the Hermopolitan myth, the Ogdoad comes together at some place or object and so forms the creator-god. In later versions, it is a creator, such as Amun or Ptah or Thoth, that brings the eight into being and thereby brings himself into being (Pinch 2002: 175–176). However, in the Khonsu Cosmogony, depicted within the precinct of the Khonsu temple at Karnak (Parker and Lesko 1988; Cruz-Uribe 1994), the Ogdoad is just one element amalgamated into a larger mythology, in which can be identified three gods and two goddesses that may correspond to the characters of the Ophite myth. The hieroglyphic inscriptions bearing the Khonsu Cosmogony at the Karnak temple may date to the late Ptolemaic or early Roman period (Cruz-Uribe 1994: 184–185).

The inscriptions begin with an invocation to the great Nun, who is, in one aspect, a goddess but functions primarily as the primeval waters from which everything is created. The first and chief god in the cosmogony is Amun-Re, who has authority over heaven, earth, and the netherworld (plates 35.2). The wife of Amun was Mut ("mother"), who is equated with Nun (34.46) and possibly Mehetweret (cf. 36.19). In the form of the "first snake" (= Ptah) Amun begets the "second snake." This second snake ejaculates into the waters, creating an egg (35.11–13). He swallows these waters and then travels, in the form of Khonsu, to Thebes (= Hathor). Khonsu places his body on Hathor and so creates her; because he carries the pregnant waters within his neck, Hathor is thus created

with the Ogdoad (within her?) (35.14–20). The Ogdoad swims to the Island of Fire and so brings into existence "the first primeval one of Mehetweret" (35.22–23). This one is identified as Re (35.36), who is later equated with "Khonsu-in-Thebes-Nefer-hotep" (= Horus), thus reusing the motif of the creator creating himself (36.3–4).

As with the Ophite mythology, the basic structure of the Khonsu Cosmogony consists of a male triad standing in relation to two female characters, with a second female character being responsible for bringing forth the creator (see Table 4).

Correspondences between the Khonsu Cosmogony and the Ophite Myth

"Nun" means abyss and so may correspond to the deep (*bythus*) within which the First Man exists (AH 1.30.1). According to Manetho, Amun meant "concealed" or "invisible" (Wilkinson 2002: 92) and so would be a suitable inspiration for the first principle of the Gnostics (cf. "Invisible Spirit," *Apocryphon of John* 2.33) (Parrott 1987: 74). Amun is called "father" (35.3). It is interesting that Amun was regarded as the one "in whom all gods were subsumed" (cf. *Apocryphon of John* 3.2) (Wilkinson 2002: 94). Given the strong association between the Ophites and snakes, it is notable that the First Man and the Second Man seem to correspond to the First Snake and the Second Snake; we might speculate that men and snakes were consciously exchanged because of the desire to portray Ialdabaoth as a serpent (cf. *Contra Celsum* 6.24–31). A third snake is not mentioned in the inscriptions at Karnak, but the self-engendered Khonsu (= Re) could reasonably be regarded as such.

Irenaeus describes the generation of the Second Man as a production of the First Woman (= Ennoia). The Second Snake "came forth from Nun" (35.27). The dual-intercourse of the First and Second Man with the First Woman is paralleled in the Khonsu Cosmogony, which says, "he [Second Snake] united (himself) with the body of his father [First Snake]" (35.29). The Second Snake then "ejaculated at this place in the lake" (35.12), that is, into Nun/Mut. The

TABLE 4 *The primary deities of the Khonsu cosmology.*

Amun (first snake)	Mut (mother)
Khonsu (second snake)	Hathor
Re (creator)	

overflow of light perhaps finds precedent in the description of Hathor as "the semen which comes forth from him, which overflows with him" (35.31). Just as Sophia moves the primeval waters (AH 1.30.3), so the waters "circulate" in the coming forth of the creator god (35.24).

The Third Man is described as an "incorruptible light" and is a savior-figure. Re, who I have coordinated with the Third Man, is a sun-god and it is said that he "will illuminate the land from the darkness" (35.25).

Just as Sophia brought forth Ialdabaoth and, consequently, seven rulers (AH 1.30.4), so Hathor "conceived the seven, great ones" (36.21). Sophia with the seven rulers constitute a complete Hebdomad; the seven gods conceived by Hathor are "seven utterances of the head, complete and exact, her rulership being precise and whole" (36.21–22).

There are limits to the parallels. The creator god (Khonsu/Re) is not portrayed as a malign creator like Ialdabaoth. I have compared Re with both Christ and Ialdabaoth, and it is plausible that when creation came to be viewed as a negative act, then the two roles were separated.

The (so-called) Barbeloite Mythology (AH 1.29)

Having established some strong parallels between the Khonsu Cosmogony and the Ophite mythology, one can attempt a similar process with the Barbeloite mythology, also recorded by Irenaeus, and the Heliopolitan Cosmogony. This section will, admittedly, be more speculative as I am not using a single Egyptian text for comparison.

The first principle of the Barbeloite mythology is an unnameable father, who wishes to reveal himself to Barbelo. From the Father proceeds Thought, and upon her request, a further three female aeons emanate. Barbelo, rejoicing in these aeons, produces a similar light named Christ and, upon his request, a further three male aeons emanate (1.29.1). From conjunctions of these aeons emanates the Self-Originate (with consort), four luminaries, and four aeons that connect with each luminary (1.29.2). The Self-Originate produces the perfect man, Adamas (1.29.3). It is "the first angel who stands by the side of the only-begotten,"[4] who, in turn, produces Sophia. Sophia creates the "first ruler" without the blessing of the Father (1.29.4).

The basic structure of this mythology is a father-figure from whom proceeds four pairs of consorts (Table 5). This pattern of nine aeons above the Self-

4 If the "only-begotten" is the Self-Originate, then perhaps the angels who stand by his side are the four luminaries. If this is the case, then perhaps the "first angel" is Armogenes.

TABLE 5 *The primary aeons of the "Barbeloite" myth.*

	Father	
Christ		Thought
Intellect		Prior Acquaintance
Word		Incorruptibility
Will		Eternal Life
	Self-Originate	

TABLE 6 *The ennead of Heliopolis.*

	Atum	
Shu (air)		Tefnut (moisture)
Geb (earth)		Nut (sky)
Osiris (underworld)		Isis (protection)
Seth (chaos)		Nephtys (dead)
	Horus (ideal man)	

Originate may be compared to the ennead of deities above Horus known from the Heliopolitan Cosmogony.

The Heliopolitan Cosmogony

The Heliopolitan Cosmogony originated from the city of Iunu (Greek: Heliopolis). It involves an ennead of gods and goddesses, the first being the creator and ancestor of the subsequent deities. The earliest written sources for this mythology are the Pyramid Texts dating from the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty (c. 2500–2200 BCE) (Faulkner 1969), but the same ennead of deities recurs in Egyptian texts which date from the Roman period.

Like the primary aeons of the "Barbeloite" myth, the ennead of Heliopolis consists of four divine couples presided over by a father-figure, Atum. Atum is the creator-god, who is self-generated and creates the other eight gods. The *Papyrus Brehmer-Rhind* recounts their creation in the words of Atum: "I created my own every being . . . I sneezed out Shu . . . I spat out Tefnut . . . Next Shu and Tefnut produced Geb and Nut . . . Geb and Nut then gave birth to Osiris . . . Seth, Isis, and Nephtys." Often a tenth god was added to the ennead: Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris (e.g., Pyramid Texts, utterance 219.176; see Table 6).

Correspondences between the Heliopolitan Cosmogony and the Barbeloite Myth

Having described the Barbeloite Myth and the Heliopolitan Cosmogony, and observed the basic pattern of a father-figure over four consort-pairs, we may now explore specific correspondences. Admittedly, the procession of gods from Atum is not the same as the emanation of the aeons from the Father; only the gods Shu and Tefnut are directly begotten by Atum, whereas four female aeons emanate from the Father (and no male aeons). However, there are other parallels that are highly suggestive.

We may start by mapping patterns of aeons (see Table 5) on to the pattern of gods (see Table 6), which produces some interesting correspondences:

- Incorruptibility (*aphtharsia*) is mapped to Isis, who was the goddess of protection and thus prevented corruption.
- Eternal-Life (*zoe aionos*) is mapped to Nephtys, who was the goddess of the dead and thus had power over life.
- Word (*logos*) is mapped to Osiris, who is described as the "lord of silence" (Burden 1963: 302) and is equated with the Platonic Logos by Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride* [*De Is.*] 371B; *De animae procreatione in Timaeo* [*Proc. An.*] 1014B).
- Self-Originate is mapped to Horus, who was represented as the ideal man (Te Velde 1984: 242). This is because Horus was the mythological heir to the throne of Egypt and thus always linked with the Pharaoh (Wilkinson 2002: 201), whom we might correspond with Adamas, the perfect man.

Some of the consort-relationships also match when the two patterns are mapped. For example, the Will-Eternal Life pairing maps directly on to the Seth-Nephtys pairing. However, some relationships do not map directly. In particular, Horus is the son of Osiris and Isis, so we would expect the Self-Originate to emanate from Word and Incorruptibility. Instead, the Self-Originate emanates from Word and Thought. This inconsistency might be explained by the switching of two female consorts in some earlier iteration of the Barbeloite mythology; notice that Christ (the first male aeon) is the consort of Incorruptibility rather than Thought (the first female aeon) as one might expect.

Some of the descriptions of the Father seem to resonate with descriptions of Atum. Atum was regarded as the "self-engendered one," the first god, "the monad . . . from whom all else originally came" (cf. "monad" in *Ap. John* 2.26) (Wilkinson 2002: 99). He was the sun-god, often closely associated with Ra

(utterance 215.145); utterance 600 reads, "you shone as the Benben Stone in the Temple of the Benu in Heliopolis" (cf. "the great light" in AH 1.29.1). The name "Atum" carries the idea of completion, and might be translated "totality"; he was the "lord of totality" (cf. pleroma in AH 1.29.2). Though sometimes associated with a consort (Iusaaset) in other mythologies, the role of Atum in the Heliopolitan creation myth is that of a solitary god, producing Shu and Tefnut without a consort. For this reason, he is sometimes considered a bisexual god, "the great he-she"; this concept of dual genders is a prominent feature of many Gnostic myths (cf. *Ap. John* 5.7).

Barbelo is not part of the pattern of aeons, and there does not seem to be a corresponding goddess in the Heliopolitan Ennead. In Irenaeus' account, Barbelo is seemingly passive in the initial emanation. It is the Father's desire to reveal himself to Barbelo that results in the emanations of the female aeons. It is also not clear whether Barbelo is considered as an emanation or as unengendered. This ambivalence regarding Barbelo may be due to the brevity of Irenaeus' account. However, she would be a fitting coordinate with the waters of Nun from which, according to some Egyptian myths, Atum emerged (cf. *The Shabaka Stone*). The waters of Nun are personified in the goddess Neith, the archetypal mother figure (cf. *Ap. John* 4.27). Neith, like Barbelo, produces a great light, as she was mother of the sun (Ra) (Wilkinson 2002: 157; Barrett 1992: 94).

Further Details

Having mapped the main characters of the Barbeloite mythology to the Heliopolitan Ennead, we may explore whether other characters within that mythology also have an Egyptian precedent. There are many astral gods in Egyptian mythology, but if one were to single out likely candidates as precedents for the four luminaries of the Barbeloite mythology, then it would be the "sons of Horus," sometimes known as the "four spirits of the north" or the "foreleg of Seth." These four "sons of Horus" were often represented on the canopic jars that preserved the internal organs of mummified individuals for the afterlife. It is perhaps for this reason that these four were described in the Pyramid Texts as the "friends of Pharaoh" (Pinch 2002: 204). This relationship of the four astral gods attending to Pharaoh (or Horus) seems to parallel the relationship of the luminaries standing "by the side of the only-begotten," that is, the Self-Originate (AH 1.29.4). Each of the four "sons of Horus" has an assigned protector, each a female deity, which would parallel the four aeons assigned to the four luminaries (AH 1.29.2).

TABLE 7A *The sons of Horus and protector-deities.*

Imset	Isis
Hapy	Nephthys
Duamutef	Neith
Qebekhsenuf	Serket

TABLE 7B *The luminaries and aeons.*

Armogenes	Grace
Raguel	Perception
Dauid	Understanding
Eleleth	Prudence

The objection might be raised that in such a reconstruction we seem to have replicated the roles of certain gods; for example, Isis has been mapped to both an aeon emanating from the Father (i.e., Eternal Life) and an aeon assigned to a luminary (i.e., Grace). The response to this objection is that we already find such ambiguity within Egyptian mythology. For example, in the Coffin Texts, we find Isis described both as the mother of Horus and as the protector of Imset (Faulkner 2004: 520–22).

In any case, I am not proposing that Egyptian mythologies were simply rebranded as Gnostic ones. The history of Egyptian religion demonstrates considerable dynamism in the Egyptian pantheon as gods are exchanged, equated, or quietly fall from favor. We should not expect Egyptian mythologies to recur unchanged in Gnostic schemes.

Joining the Dots

Having evidenced some significant parallels between the Ophite and Barbeloite mythologies and Egyptian cosmogonies, it is incumbent upon me to give some account of how these Egyptian elements (recorded in hieroglyphs) may have found their way into the speculations of the Gnostics (composed in Greek).

The traditional Egyptian religion had a continued vitality well into the Roman period. Though Augustus instituted an imperial cult in Alexandria and

obliged all temples in Egypt to offer daily sacrifices for the emperor, the ancient temples were not barred or destroyed (Capponi 2010: 102). Though the Egyptian clergy found some of their privileges impeded, they retained their position and became part of the Greek-speaking elite (Fowden 1986: 15; Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 211–212; Clarysse 2010: 293). The erection of new Egyptian temples during the Roman period is a witness to the vitality of the traditional religion (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 225); we have noted how the Karnak temple bearing the Khonsu Cosmogony may date from the early Roman period. Traditionally, temples were "forbidden territory," available only to the clergy, and popular religion was practiced outside the main temples in minor shrines or through cult-guilds (Clarysse 2010: 277–279; Frankfurter 2010: 528). However, something of a transformation occurred during the Roman period with religious "tourism." Non-Egyptians became fascinated with Egyptian religion, and the cult-centers became pilgrimage sites for visitors (Frankfurter 2010: 544).

Yet while it is possible that someone of this period may have had access to the temple precincts, it is far more likely that Egyptian cosmogonies were being read on papyrus rather than stone. The priests continued to make copies of ancient religious texts for their own use (Clarysse 2010: 285). The library of the temple of Edfu bears witness to the wide range of literature, including cosmogonical texts, that was being produced within priestly circles (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 233). As well as making new copies of older papyri, the priests were also elaborating on the old mythologies; texts from this period exhibit a religious dynamism and synthesis of religious concepts. For example, a Demotic papyrus, now in Berlin, is a cosmogonic text that synthesized Memphite and Hermopolitan traditions (P. Berlin 13603) (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 234). Yet these texts were not confined to the priestly class. Interest from non-Egyptians in the Roman period created a "market" for texts of Egyptian religion in Greek (Frankfurter 2010: 531). The priests were happy to provide these texts, consistent with attempts to "proselytize" Greeks by providing knowledge of names and deeds of the Egyptian deities (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 233). Iamblichus takes his account of Egyptian religion from certain texts, which he believes to be translations from Egyptian into Greek (*De mysteriis* VIII.4), though they may have been from some tradition connected to the Hermetic corpus (Clark 2008). The Books of Thoth demonstrate the continued interest in cosmogony (P. Vindov D.6336, 6343, 6614). The Greek magical papyri cover a range of material, including theogonies (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* [PGM] VII.11.516–521); the Hermopolitan Ogdoad features in several of these Greek papyri (PGM III.145; cf. PGM XXI). It is entirely plausible that the authors of the Ophite and Barbeloite mythologies could have had access to Greek papyri recounting the cosmogonies to which I have referred.

Through these texts, Egyptian religion took a life separate from the temples. The Hermetic corpus is a prime example because, though it is attributed to Thoth, it developed independently of the Thoth temple-cult (Frankfurter 2010: 544). Egyptian religion was already remarkably dynamic. Their mythological traditions drew freely from one another so that one tradition might be an amalgamation of features drawn from other mythologies (Tower Hollis 1998: 66), often for political expediency (Cruz-Uribe 1994: 185). The Khonsu Cosmogony is a prime example of how various mythological traditions can be drawn together into a single, if sometimes convoluted, creation story. Such forms of inventive syncretism allowed for a degree of religious unity within Egypt. Once separated from the temple, religious ideas could be elaborated in the textual tradition according to the whims of those making the texts. An individual of the second century in Egypt would have had available to him Egyptian cosmogonical texts in Greek, which he could syncretize with his religious views if he so chose. It is illustrative that the Hermetic corpus, which developed out of traditional Egyptian religion, has many affinities with Gnosticism (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 275).

Implications

In this article I have proposed that the Ophite and Barbeloite mythologies summarized in *Against Heresies* 1.29–30, in part, reflect on Egyptian theogonies. It should go without saying that these mythologies are not fully explained by reference to Egyptian religion and depend in large part on Jewish and Christian sources (among others). The final question for this article is what, if anything, does Egyptian influence on these mythologies imply about the origins of Gnosticism in general?

There seem to be three possible routes for Egyptian material to enter Gnostic mythologies:

(1) The Gnostics were primarily an Egyptian movement, developing traditional religion in new directions and only later syncretized with the Judeo-Christian tradition;
(2) Egyptian material was already being incorporated into Judaism prior to the revolution that spawned Gnosticism; or
(3) the Gnostics sought to find knowledge in many religious sources and searched Egyptian religious texts for this knowledge.

The first hypothesis, through intriguing, does depend on crediting these hypothetical Egyptian proto-Gnostics with such a profound syncretism that

they abandoned the majority of their religious tradition in favor of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This seems inconsistent with the way Egyptian religion had syncretized with Greek religion — in that case, the syncretism was profoundly one-sided in favor of the Egyptian one (Fowden 1986: 19). The second hypothesis, while possible, seems to require pre-Gnostic Jewish monotheists to incorporate polytheistic mythologies into their religion. This is not inconceivable but seems highly unlikely.

The third hypothesis has, at least, the virtue of having some evidence to substantiate it. According to Hippolytus, the Naassenes, who style themselves "Gnostics," attempted to harmonize other religious ideas, including Egyptian, with their own views (*Refutation of All Heresies* v.4). These Naassenes, identified by Edwards as "the earliest Gnostics," sought to divine the sense behind the religion of others (Edwards 1996: 80). They have also been seen as precursors to the Ophite mythology summarized by Irenaeus (Casey 1926; cf. Edwards 1996: 74–75). Yet whatever the relationship between the Naassenes and the Ophites, they are not the only example of syncretism amongst Gnostics. For example, the *Apocryphon of John* refers to the Book of Zoroaster.

If this hypothesis were correct, then it would suggest that the Ophites (and Barbeloites?) imported Egyptian theogony into their mythology as part of their attempts to find divine truth in other religious traditions. Recasting gods as aeons allowed this material to be incorporated into a monist tradition without surrendering the structure of the theogony.

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